Web 2.0 Applications in Reaching Out to Asian Distance Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Modern day learning experience has come a long way beyond pedagogical instructions and face to face interaction. As globalization advances, education is increasingly crossing borders of regions and nations. Educational systems have to now respond to other profound changes, such as the knowledge explosion, the changing interaction between the public and private spheres etc. Universities have also to respond to quantitative changes, including a massive overall increase in intake everywhere. The demands of the learners are also changing. With the continuing explosion of knowledge and the breaking down of the old fixed patterns of employment, learners are increasingly demanding a type of education that allows them to update their knowledge whenever necessary and to go on doing so throughout their working lives. All of these developments are closely intertwined with the most striking development of all, which is the phenomenal growth of information and communication technologies. These are having a profound effect at all levels of education, including traditional university programmes; however, they arguably are noted to benefit the distance learners in particular.

In this paper, the term 'distance learners' is being used to denote students enrolling themselves into either distance education or off-campus programmes. Most distance learners face time, mobility and financial constraints because of their career and family circumstances. Given the right computer technology, they can give themselves maximum benefit of flexible learning. Generally, most major distance education universities operate a mixture of the synchronous and asynchronous modalities for broadcasting or disseminating their programmes to their students. Students who are enrolled in distance education programmes often are unable to come to the campus or off-campus location for the administrative, student, and academic services they need. Institutions offering full programmes via distance education need to provide the full range of services at times and in ways that are convenient for these students. These services include admissions and registration, enrollment advising, academic advising, financial aid, career counseling, library resources, self-learning materials ordering etc. Advances in technology have had a significant impact on the way that institutions provide services, particularly administrative and library services, to all of their students. This has helped to narrow the differences in the way distance learners and on-campus learners are served. Yet, it does not always result in distance learners receiving a full range of services.

NEED FOR DISTANCE LIBRARY SERVICES

Several professional bodies like the Indian Library Association (ILA), American Library Association (ALA), Association of College and Research Libraries under ALA, Commonwealth of Learning (COL) etc., have clearly spelt out standards and guidelines for offering distance library services. Owing to the quantum leap in online and distance learning systems and institutions, globally the body of literature on distance library services is also observed to be increasing rapidly. But what makes distance library services valuable? Distance Education (DE) or Distance Learning (DL) or Online & Distance Learning (ODL) or be it any name such as education through correspondence or even e-learning, the very obvious fact is that the teacher and the taught are physically separated by means of time and space; and this calls for

sound support in terms of supplementary materials for a fruitful learning experience to take place. This very fact itself makes distance or off-campus library services valuable.

- **Collapsing boundaries:** Even though distance education has a long and diverse history, dating back to 1840, in the last ten-to-fifteen years it has been completely transformed by the emergence of web-based technology. Over the last decade, an increasing number of academic institutions have built satellite campuses and developed online courses to meet the needs of distance learners. As these academic institutions have expanded, demand for library service has increased significantly. It also infers that today's increasingly e-learning culture collapses the boundaries between regular on-site students and off-campus, external programme students, i.e., distance learners. Hence any kind of library service extended as a part of distance library service using emerging digital media also benefits the on-campus students. For example, the COL Topical Guide on Developing Library and Information Services for Distance Education (Watson, 2003) mentions the most important distance library service considerations to be timeliness of service; high level and quality access to distance library materials; and, where possible, to initiate and maintain personal contact with students and faculty. If distance library services are designed keeping in view these considerations, they can be as beneficial for the on-campus learner as they will be for off-campus learner. This is one of the aspects that make distance library services valuable.

- **Accreditation:** For institutions of higher education, accreditation and re-accreditation are facts of academic life. Since accreditation standards now include distance education and related support services, librarians and library administrators involved with distance learners and distance education programmes need to know the published guidelines and methods for demonstrating that standards are being met. Jerabek (2004) discusses ways to become familiar with relevant accreditation standards, and reviews pertinent items from the Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) Guidelines for Distance Learning library services. The article also notes practices suggested in the Guidelines, especially those related to assessment and evaluation, which provide methods and later that can be used to document how specific standards are met. The accreditation and re-accreditation procedures and the pre-requisites that are needed to be fulfilled by the institutions are yet another aspect that makes distance library services valuable in the present day context.

- **Faculty-Librarian Collaboration:** In 2001, Texas Tech University Library surveyed faculty who taught distance learning courses. Hufford (2004) reports the findings of the survey. Implicit in the article is the belief that a clear understanding of the needs and expectations of faculty serves as a foundation on which librarians can build a solid program of support for distance learners. This clear understanding may also serve as the basis for better strategies to educate faculty on how librarians can improve distance learning courses. Unfortunately, what faculty think about library support for distance learning courses is not always clearly understood. To a significant extent, this limited understanding is due to a dearth of information in the professional literature on the subject, the author of the article quips and recommends that more surveys need to be completed and the results published so that distance learning librarians can better understand faculty and better inform them, optimizing support for distance learners. The underlying aspect that the distance librarians can help improve distance learning courses by collaborating with the faculty is one more dimension that can be showcase the value of distance library services.

- **Information Literacy:** Russell Ackoff (1989) a systems theorist and professor of organizational change is widely credited with proposing a five tier structure of human learning viz., data, information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. By now it is widely accepted that when data is processed it takes the shape of information, when information is applied it is knowledge, and the assimilation of knowledge that displays the ability to make good judgment is wisdom. In fact, the aim of the modern education is to cultivate personality and creative intelligence of the students. The purpose of education is

to cultivate the mind of students so that a life-long learning becomes possible. In 1974 Paul Zurkowski, the president of the US Information Industry Association, first used the term 'Information Literacy', to refer to people who knew how to apply information resources to their work. A widely accepted definition of Information Literacy is the statement given in 1989 by the Presidential Committee on Information Literacy of American Library Association (ALA), "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information." 'Conscientious use' is as important as the 'effective and efficient use'. By 'conscientious use' what is meant is that, there should not be any violation of Intellectual Property Rights. Other social and ethical concerns like censorship, privacy, security etc. should also be kept in mind while using information.

Importance of information literacy in general and for a distance learner in particular is:
   o   To become an independent life-long learner.
   o   To develop a critical thinking approach, which is important for the progress of a society.
   o   To assess and filter the information in the electronic environment, as on the face of it, all Web based information looks alike.
   o   To respect the ownership of information, especially in the digital environment.
   o   To recognize and prevent intentional or unintentional plagiarism.
   o   For ethical use of information.
   o   For sound decision making and personal empowerment.
   o   To understand different cultures and empathize with the view point of others.
   o   To detect disinformation and misinformation.

However, the basic library and information services needed by the distance learners are:
   o   Access to information resources such as texts, supplementary reading and reference services.
   o   Learning how to find the information they need from the information that is available.
   o   Developing ways to apply the information gleaned to make sound, information-based decisions.

Having identified the requirements of distance learners and the ODL institutions, how effectively and efficiently the library provides these services to their users, i.e., the distance learners is what finally makes distance library services the most valuable. The emerging digital media technologies have thrown open new vistas for developing innovative methods of reaching out to the distance learner not only for the faculty but also for the librarians.

DISTANCE LEARNERS AND WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS AND LIBRARY 2.0

Libraries can make wide use of Web 2.0 technologies to assist learners in making better use of their physical as well as electronic library resources. Both didactic resources and more interactive technologies can be used to offer individual or group assistance. Libraries can also produce videos such as library tours, explanations of how to use some of their resources like databases, search tools, electronic journals etc. and also for imparting information skills, which can be hosted on the library website or other external social video sharing site such as YouTube or TeacherTube.

For example, Lee (2004) from Regent University shares that, in an attempt to expand its course offerings to distance learners, the university began offering online courses during the early 1990s, and it also developed a new satellite campus. As the Regent University Library has explored new and varied ways to serve students on the new satellite campus and other distance learners, the implementation of services has been challenging, but rewarding, for the library staff. Likewise many educational institutions in western countries are widely using

Podcasts and vidcasts to complement traditional ways of communicating information about library services and resources. They include virtual library tours that are particularly appreciated by distance learners who have limited access to the facilities on campus. Blogs are one of the widely used social networking software by libraries to announce new resources and general news. They are also used as a platform by the librarians and their user community to share ideas and feedback.

Slideshare can be used to make PowerPoint presentations on information skills, bibliographic instruction and information literacy available to all the users, particularly to distance learners. Users can subscribe to RSS feeds for keeping themselves update with the sites they regularly visit for gathering information. Such RSS feeds are provided by RSS aggregators like Pageflakes, Atom, Feedburner etc.

Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc. can be used to connect with the users and offer them instantaneous virtual reference and information services. Social bookmarking and social tagging tools like TagCloud, Bibsonomy, Del.icio.us, etc. widgets can be incorporated by the librarian into his blog or library website, enabling the user to participate and collaborate.

The University of Calgary Distance Education Librarian keeps distance learners up-to-date on library services through RSS feeds to the library's distance education page and all course e-learning sites and online tutorials by posting information to a blog which is distributed either as email or an RSS feed; a chat icon on the course sites can be used to access the librarian when available.

DISTANCE LIBRARY SERVICES SCENARIO IN ASIA

The authors have studied ODL institutions from Asia (Asian Association of Open Universities), and the kind of library support services that are being offered presently to distance learners by using web 2.0 technologies. The authors have analysed the websites of the libraries of open universities of Asia. The factors for analysing the library services were mainly the web presence of the ODL institution or the University's library, electronic/digital library services that are offered through their website i.e., web-based library and information services, and then application of Web 2.0 technologies like Internet enabled instant messaging or blogging or information literacy instruction by using any of the Web 2.0 technologies, and connecting to the users through social networking tools like Facebook, Twitter etc.

The detailed table below presents an overview of the library and information services offered by various ODL institutions in Asia.

Sl. No.	Name of the ODL Institution or University	Web presence of library or Library website	Web-based library services (Digital Library or E-Journals)	Web 2.0 Applications	Social Networking
1	Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan	No	No	No	No
2	Al-Quds Open University, Jordan	Yes	Yes	No	No
3	Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh	No	No	No	No
4	Beijing Open University, China	No	No	No	No

Sl. No.	Name of the ODL Institution or University	Web presence of library or Library website	Web-based library services (Digital Library or E-Journals)	Web 2.0 Applications	Social Networking
5	Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, India	Yes	No	No	No
6	Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad, India	Yes	No	No	No
7	Hanoi Open University, Vietnam	Yes	No	No	No
8	Hanyang Cyber University, Korea	Yes (Internal access)	No	No	No
9	The Henan Radio and TV University, China	No	No	No	No
10	Hochi Minh City Open University, Vietnam	No	No	No	No
11	Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
12	Inter Mongolia Radio and TV University, Mangolia	No	No	No	No
13	Jiangsu Radio and TV University	No	No	No	No
14	Korea Cyber University, Korea	No	No	No	No
15	Korea National University, Korea	No	No	No	No
16	National Open University, Taiwan	Yes	No	No	No
17	Netaji Subhas Open University, West Bengal, India	No	No	No	No
18	M.P. Bhoj Open University, Bhopal, India	Yes	Yes	No	No
19	Open University of China, China	No	No	No	No
20	Open University of Malaysia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
21	Open University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong	Yes	Yes	No	No
22	Open University of Israel	Yes	Yes	No	No
23	Open University of Sri	Yes	Yes		

Sl. No.	Name of the ODL Institution or University	Web presence of library or Library website	Web-based library services (Digital Library or E-Journals)	Web 2.0 Applications	Social Networking
	Lanka				
24	Payame Noor University, Iran	Not accessible	–	–	–
25	Shannxi Radio and TV University	Not accesbile	–	–	–
26	Shanghai TV University	Not accessible	–	–	–
27	Sichuan Radio and TV University	Not accesbile	–	–	–
28	Shenyang Radio and TV University	Not accessible	–	–	–
29	Singapore Institute of Management (Open University Programme), Singapore	Yes	Yes	No	No
30	Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand	Yes	No	No	No
31	Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning, Pune, India	No	No	No	No
32	Tamil Nadu Open University, Chennai, India	No	No	No	No
33	Open University of Japan, Japan	No	No	No	No
34	U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Allahabad, India	Yes	No	No	No
35	Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia Open University, Indonesia	No	No	No	No
36	Tianjin Radio and TV University, China	Not accessible	–	–	–
37	Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
38	University of Philippines Open University, Philippines	Not accessible	–	–	–
39	Vardhman Mahavir Open University, Kota, India	Yes	No	No	No
40	Wawaasan Open	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Sl. No.	Name of the ODL Institution or University	Web presence of library or Library website	Web-based library services (Digital Library or E-Journals)	Web 2.0 Applications	Social Networking
	University, Penang, Malaysia				
41	Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nasik, India	No	No	No	No
42	Yunnan Radio and TV University	No	No	No	No
43	International Centre for Academics, Nepal (IGNOU Partner Instt.)	Link to IGNOU	Link to IGNOU	Link to IGNOU	No
44	Zhejiang Radio and TV University, China	Not accessible	–	–	–
45	Nalanda Open University, Patna, India	No	No	No	No
46	Karnataka State Open University, Mysore	Not accessible	–	–	–
47	Pandit Sunderlal Sharma Open University, Bilaspur, India	No	No	No	No
48	Uttarakhand Open University, Haldwani, India	No	No	No	No
49	K.K. Handique State University, Guwahati, India	No	No	No	No
50	MIT School of Distance Education, Pune, India	Yes	No	No	No
	Total	**19**	**8**	**4**	**1**
	Percentage	**38.00%**	**16.00%**	**8.00%**	**2.00%**

From the above analysis of 50 ODL institutions and universities, only 19 of them have web-presence. That is to say only 38% of them have their library websites. 8 of them i.e., 16% offer web-based library services like digital library services or access to electronic resources like journals, databases and information resources. Only 4 i.e., 8% of these institutions are making use of Web 2.0 applications like instant messaging, blogs for providing reference services, information services and information literacy instruction. Only 1 (2%) university is connecting to their user base through the popular social networking sites.

The following institutions are offering quality distance library services in Asia, which the authors think that need a special mention with respect to their application of Web 2.0 technologies for reaching out to their user base.

Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India: The library website is rich and informative. Access to e-journals is provided with updated links. The DSpace learning

repository provides access to the Self-Learning Material including audio and video resources to the registered users. The IGNOU library blog is functional with a variety of information for their users.

Open University of Malaysia, Malaysia: The Tan Sri Abdullah Sanusi Digital Library offers a wide range of web-based library services to their users. The digital library platform is a rich source of information for their distance learners. Services are offered via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Wordpress blogs. The library even offers information services through e-library@iradiolive and mobile services also.

Universiti Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia: This university also maintains a rich library website with latest information. The library website is informative with links to collections, services and facilities, electronic and digital information resources like e-journals and databases etc. The library also offers services through their library blog.

Wawaasan Open University, Penang, Malaysia: This is another university whose library is pro-active in providing information services to their users. The library website provides links to a variety of information resources. The section on information literacy education, library tutorial, subject guides and plagiarism guides and software are worth mentioning. The library website also offers an instant messaging service for the information needs of their users.

The above analysis shows that the ODL institutions in Malaysia are not only well aware of the information needs of their users but also strive towards satisfying them in an efficient manner by employing latest technology. Their use of Web 2.0 applications for providing library services to their users also reflects the quality of their distance learning programmes and the learners as well.

CONCLUSION

The distance library services in Asia have a long way to go. There is a vast difference between the distance library services offered in the developed countries and Asian region. This must be due to lack of awareness, differences in funding patterns, digital divide and the differences in their respective users' needs. However, it is recommended that the libraries make themselves more acquainted with the emerging new technologies and attempt to adopt them for offering library services.

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